

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000375

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EFIN](#) [PINR](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: MALAWI TO MUDDLE THROUGH ELECTIONS

REF: A. 03 LILONGWE 1202

[1B](#). LILONGWE 333

[1C](#). LILONGWE 326

Classified By: Pol/Econ Officer Peter W. Lord, reasons 1.5 (b/d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) confirmed on May 5 that presidential and parliamentary elections will take place on May 18 in spite of continuing difficulties with the voters' roll, a flawed verification process, and a significant funding gap. On the political scene, a last-ditch clergy-led attempt at uniting the opposition to field a single presidential candidate was unsuccessful. The Mgwirizano Coalition presidential candidate Gwanda Chakuamba's campaign is gaining steam, as criticism mounts against front-runner Bingu wa Mutharika of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF). While the MEC is likely to muddle through the elections, the run-up to polling day has been marred by inequitable access to the state-owned media. In addition, some voters may be disenfranchised by the MEC's administrative incompetence. END SUMMARY.

THE LAST DONOR-MEC MEETING

[1](#)2. (SBU) Donor Chiefs of Missions and the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) met on May 5 to discuss final election preparations, the voters' roll verification process, and continued problems with the budget. The MEC was represented by Chair Justice James Kalaile and Chief Elections Officer Roosevelt Gondwe.

A FLAWED VERIFICATION PROCESS AND ITS REMEDY

[1](#)3. (SBU) Gondwe conceded that the verification process, which was supposed to allow voters and new registrants to confirm that their information had been properly updated, "was not a successful exercise." He concluded there was low voter turnout because people knew the roster available in voting centers was the one from the 1999 elections, not an updated version. Recognizing that the process failed, Gondwe said the updated, computerized rosters would be distributed to voting centers on May 11 and would be available for inspection until polling day. The preparation of the updated roster, Gondwe said, has been greatly expedited by new computer support recently brought in from South Africa. No provisions have been made, however, to deal with the at least one million extra names on the voters' roll (reftel C).

A BUDGET WITHOUT BUCKS

[1](#)4. (SBU) Kalaile confirmed that the elections budget remains USD 18.4 million. He, however, noted that new expenditures of USD 105,000 for South African computer support and USD 500,000 for political party monitoring training were not reflected in the current budget. Representatives from the Ministry of Finance have "verbally committed" to pay for the computer support, but there is still USD 3.5 to 4 million in expected spending beyond MEC resources. The GOM again appealed to the donors to provide additional financial support, but all -- again -- declined to do so. Speaking about the funding gap, Kalaile told poloff the GOM "will just have to run a deficit that will be made up in next year's budget."

MULUZI'S ALLEGATIONS AGAINST EU OBSERVERS "BASELESS"

[1](#)5. (SBU) Kalaile characterized as "baseless" President Muluzi's accusations that the EU Observer Team had been "decampaigning" the UDF government (reftel B). Upon hearing the President's allegations, Kalaile said the MEC made inquiries into the situation and "found no evidence" of improper behavior by the EU Observers.

A FINAL, FAILED ATTEMPT AT OPPOSITION UNIFICATION

[1](#)6. (SBU) In a last-ditch attempt to persuade opposition parties to field one presidential candidate, church leaders hosted April 26-27 talks among the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) Brown Mpinganjira, Malawi Congress Party's (MCP) John Tembo, independent presidential candidate Justin Malewezi, and the Mgwirizano Coalition led by Gwanda Chakuamba. Although the opposition leaders were unable to

agree to a unified ticket, they released a joint statement calling on Kalaile to correct the voters' roll, implement a proper verification process, stop the UDF from using public resources in its campaign, and rectify the state-owned media's bias in favor of the ruling UDF. The statement demanded that Kalaile "address these concerns within seven days or he should resign to allow a more capable person to preside over the coming elections." (COMMENT: Although the call for Kalaile's resignation was hyperbolic, the concerns expressed are genuine. The MEC's decision to make the voters' roll available in voting centers on May 11, which has not yet been publicly announced, may be a result of the opposition leaders' press statement.)

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

17. (SBU) Gwanda Chakuamba's presidential campaign as the Mgwirizano Coalition presidential candidate has gained momentum. Independent newspapers and public polls indicate that Chakuamba is running a strong campaign. Chakuamba's recent gains, however, have not extended to the Mgwirizano Coalition parliamentary candidates, who remain disorganized and largely loyal to their respective parties rather than to the Coalition.

18. (SBU) While Chakuamba's campaign is gaining steam, Bingu wa Mutharika and the ruling UDF have come under greater scrutiny after a high-level COMESA report surfaced about Mutharika's 1997 firing from the position of COMESA Secretary General. The report details misuse of funds, leadership incompetence, and a GOM-orchestrated sack. While Mutharika's departure from COMESA has been publicly known since Mutharika was selected as the UDF's presidential candidate, it has only recently become a major campaign issue.

COMMENT

PROSPECTS OF FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

19. (C) It is clear that the fairness of the electoral process has been compromised by inequitable access to the state-owned media. In addition, logistical problems with the administration of the vote, and the more than one million extra names on the voters' roll could potentially lead to voting fraud. While Malawians may end up accepting the elections, these concerns cannot be ignored in assessing the elections' credibility.

110. (C) The sudden declaration that the elections will occur on May 18, which two weeks ago was declared an impossible task, is likely a political decision made due to the recent success of Chakuamba's campaign and the growing questions about Mutharika. With Mutharika's superior access to resources and the state-owned media, however, the election is still his to lose. END COMMENT.

BROWNING